

North to Alaska

Salmon, Trout and Grizzlies; my fishing trip of a lifetime

By Phil Howarth

In 2012, my good friend and colleague JD persuaded me to go on a fishing trip to Alaska. After hearing about it, and seeing some of the photos from JD's last trip, I had to go.

After two years of talking about it, September 2014 came around and JD and I made the long trip from Boston to King Salmon. There we met the rest of the party (Stef, Alex, Dick, Bill, Harold, Hans and Colin) at the local watering hole to get to know each other. All of the guys are very experienced fishermen, and have a passion for fly fishing in particular, as well as a propensity to take the Mickey out of each other! at all time, which set the scene for what was going to be a trip of a lifetime!

Waking on Saturday morning a little furry around the gills, we awaited anxiously to gain confirmation that the weather conditions would allow the small plane and helicopter to transport us to the remote Alaskan Peninsula that was going to be our home for the next week. At 10 am, we got the OK and started to pre-



STEF FARRAND PHOTOS

OUT OUR BACK DOOR – The view of the mountains across the valley from our camp.

pare; donning Chest Waders and carrying an 8wt Sage with Hatch Reel attached and a small box of salmon flies. Other bags were transported on a second flight due to the weight (mainly JD and I, to be fair!). The scenery on the 45 minute flight was simply breathtaking; flying level with snow capped mountains at this time of year, especially ones that still breathed volcanic smoke was very cool. After 10 minutes in the air we were in the wilderness, with no sign of human activity until we reached the camp.

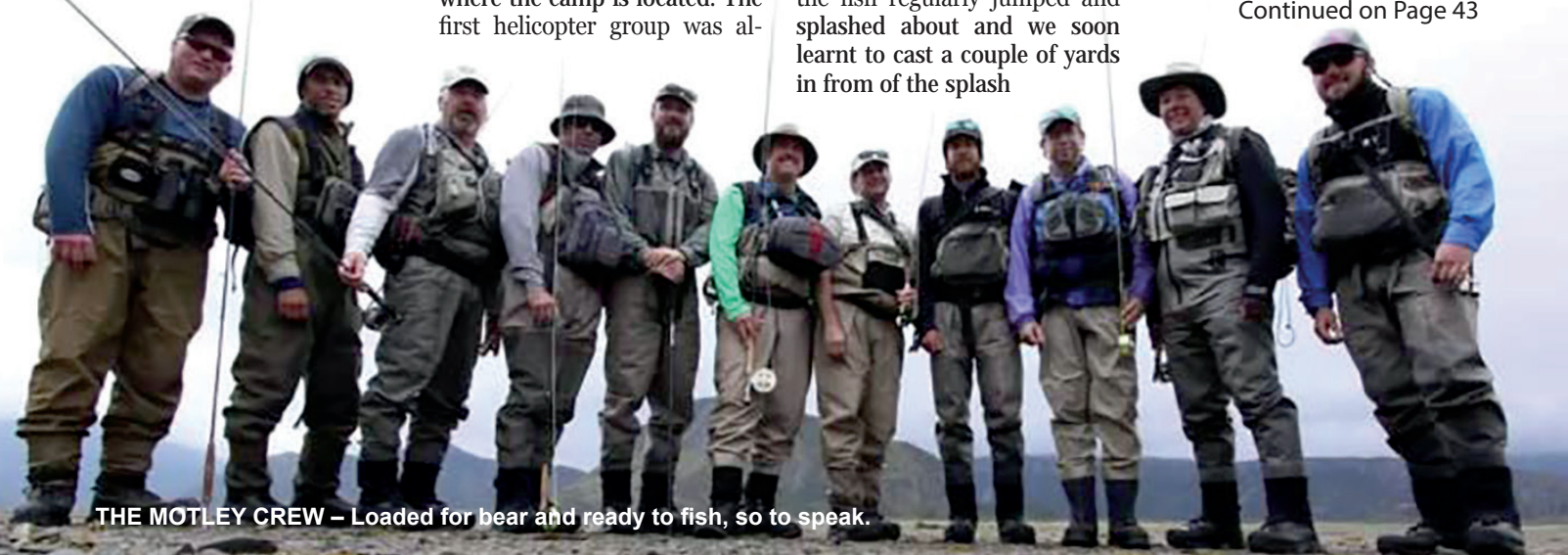
We hopped over the final mountain to be greeted by the extensive flats of the estuary where the camp is located. The first helicopter group was al-

ready out on the water casting. Sam landed the plane expertly on the flats. We jumped out and were met by Russ, owner of Epic Angling Adventures and his guides, Jordan, Karl and Sean (Head Chef!). Other guides, Chris and Sean, were on the flats with the group. After a short safety briefing, mainly consisting of 'beware the Bear' we got down to the water's edge and started to fish.

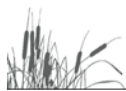
Our group fished the incoming tide in the extensive estuary. Standing along the bank we looked for fish pushing up into the river. It was difficult to sight cast as the visibility in the water was not spectacular. That said the fish regularly jumped and splashed about and we soon learnt to cast a couple of yards in from of the splash

and started to get into the magnificent Silver Salmon. We hooked plenty but only managed to land a few. To help conservation all anglers are asked to fish with barbless hooks. This, paired with the spirited and often aerobatic fight that the Silvers put up, puts the odds in their favor. The helo group had managed to cross the estuary and moved up into the river system to chase the Dolly Varden sea trout. With the water level rising rapidly, we were unable to follow and as the water spilled over from the main channel onto the flats the fish dispersed. It was time to check out our home for the next week.

Continued on Page 43



THE MOTLEY CREW – Loaded for bear and ready to fish, so to speak.



Alaska...

Continued from Page 42

The Epic Angling camp is just that, no fancy lodge with spa etc. The camp is comprised of a cook/gathering tent, 6 two man sleeping tents, shower room, and a toilet with probably the best view I have ever seen, straight across the estuary to the mountains. Whilst the camp sounds basic, the facilities are fantastic with a fully decked out kitchen, high pressure showers, drying facilities, and best of all a picnic table and benches overlooking the view.

On the Saturday evening, Sean the chef treated us to a Michelin class meal with a glass or two of a beautiful French wine. It was hard to believe we were camping in the middle of nowhere.

Sunday morning came around quickly; it's fair to say I did not get much sleep as JD snores like a Harley. I ventured down to the cook tent, grabbed a coffee and took in the view; across the estuary I watched 3 different sets of bears with their cubs wandering along the river in search of breakfast. These magnificent creatures looked tiny from the distance. Later in the day I was to find out that they are not that small close up.

The helo boys had had a fantastic time up river the day before. They reportedly had bagged over a 100 fish between the 4 of them. Hard to believe you might think, especially for fishermen. With this in mind



DON'T POKE THE BEAR – Fresh tracks like these were a common sight around the valley.

we all decided to fish upstream.

We donned the waders, dressed for the cool and damp atmosphere, filled our water bottles and headed out for the day, my group was escorted by senior guide Jordan and also Chris, both carrying spare supplies, lunch and a 12 Gauge just in case the bears proved not to be friendly. As we completed the crossing of the estuary to the river tributaries we were reminded to make plenty of noise, talk loudly and shout 'Hey Bear' regularly as to let them know we were coming. We walked a mile or so upstream along the paths made by the Grizzlies themselves, and then we came face to face with Crack Momma and her 3 kids. She was only 40 yards in front of us looking intently into a pool in search of salmon. At the multiple shouts of Hey Bear she looked up nonchalantly, checked her cubs were relatively close, and then completely ignored us! Jordan explained that she got the nickname as she is the most relaxed of the local bears and does not really seem to mind where and



COLORS OF ALASKA – Phil with one of the Dolly Varden the guys were catching on the fly rods. Spectacular looking fish.

what her cubs are up to. We took a detour to ensure she and the kids were not disturbed again, and guess what, Grizzly Bears are massive this close up.

We settled in along a stretch of fast running, gin clear mountain water and we fished salmon egg patterns along the edges of the fast water and the eddies that formed by the structure of the river. Within a minute I was into my first ever Dolly Varden sea run trout. Their coloration was spectacular. With green backs, orange spots, red underbellies and white tipped fins, they are one of the most vibrantly colored fish I have ever had the pleasure to catch. After safely returning my first ever dolly, I cast again and hooked another and another and another, and so it went on for what

seemed like eternity. I think I managed a run of 21 casts and 21 fish, something I have never done and might never to do again. The other members of the group were having similar success all around me, but I noticed that Bill was catching larger fish. It was time to find out what the secret was.

Bill is an accomplished fly fisherman and has been making flies for a very long time. On a previous trip with Epic he created what is now known as the 'Wiggy Bugger'. It's like a Woolly Bugger in grey but bigger with a couple of other magic ingredients and take my word it consistently catches the bigger dollys. Bill kindly gave me a couple that I used when I could see a bigger

Continued on Page 44



Monomoy Fishing Charters

Capt. Greg Wiesel
(508) 237-0785



Goose Hummock
Endorsed Charter
Business

Bass Blues & Tuna out of Chatham, MA



monomoyfishingcharters.com



Alaska...

Continued from Page 43

fish in the stream and they certainly did the trick.

After an eternity of catching stunning Dolly after Dolly we broke for lunch. Sitting on a log by the side of the river, I had time to admire the rugged surroundings that we had the pleasure of finding ourselves in. With clear snow run off streams, mountains and even Bald Eagles soaring above us it was easy to be caught up in a daydream. However, Blondie had other ideas as she and her two cubs wandered around the bend in the river to come nose to nose to join us for lunch. A chorus of "Hey Bear" erupted and she ambled off to fish another pool, obviously not a fan of our singing.

That night, after another of Sean's culinary masterpieces, the guys broke into the camp game of 'washers', a simple game similar to horseshoes that involves a piece of drainpipe buried to create a small pit and 4 large metal washers with a diameter just enough that they could fit in. Two teams of two stand 5 yards from the hole and try to toss the washer into the hole. I was partnered with Karl, expert guide but highly dubious washer player, and we subsequently got hammered by Dick and Stef. So poor was our performance that Chris, an amateur musician, sang a ballad on our last night to celebrate our performance. "Karl's crap at washers" might even go platinum when released.

Another sleepless night in the Harley tent and I was ready for another day. The fishing had been so spectacular the day before we unanimously chose to do it all again, and we did, even the game of washers.

On Tuesday JD, Hans and I chose to try some of the far pools for Salmon, right in the far corner of the estuary, a spot where Hans had done really well before. We marched over the river and the flats to get to the pools, only to be greeted by yet another



STEF FARRAND PHOTO

THE COMPETITION – We had to keep a constant eye out for the bears who were in the neighborhood for the same reason we were. Lots of fish..

er bear and her cubs. We chose to leave them be and moved to one of the higher pools. It was full of Salmon with Pink, Silvers and Chum all in the mix. We fished hard for them with little success, because now that they had moved up through the main river they had lost their appetite and were concentrating on spawning. I did bag my first Pink and also Chum salmon so it was a great day out for me.

Whilst we were at the pools, Stef and Dick had taken the boat out to the bay with Russ. They had a great trip and caught black cod and a nice Halibut that Russ kept for supper. That evening we ate like royalty, enjoying fresh halibut that tasted like no halibut I had ever got from a fishmonger. Karl and I went into battle again on the washer's court and actually managed to win a game. Somebody kindly gave me a set of earplugs and I slept like a baby, not even JD re-tuning his motorbike collection could disturb me.

Being a sea fishing lover, I had to try to catch a Halibut on a fly. So Thursday Bill and I set out with Russ to see how we would do. We looked for crashing seagulls, the global fish locators and when we found them we mooched over to see what we could find. Bill got straight into the cod. The halibut were less cooperative and eventually I conceded defeat as with the rising tide the current was too strong to get the fly down deep

enough. An hour or so in, the wind changed to go against the tide and it started to get a little rough so it was time to make our way back. We travelled along the shoreline and after a while I realized that I could see several miles of beach with not a single piece of litter on it. It really drove it home to me how remote a part of the world we had the pleasure to be in.

In the afternoon we all lined the main river to again fish the rising tide from slack water. All 9 of us formed a fly fishing gauntlet and got stuck into the Salmon. Between us, we hooked 50 fish yet I bet only 10 made the bank. Never have I laughed so much at my and my friend's misfortune as we lost fish after fish. With the strong currents and aerobatic displays, we did not stand a chance and barbed hooks were not an option.

Thursday night was steak night, and I cannot comprehend how Sean managed to cook it the way he did. I have simply never had a rib eye steak cooked that well in all the restaurants I have ever been in, all on a charcoal smoker grill. Amazing.

Friday was a bit of a write off. It had rained most of Thursday night and the main river was running hard and unfishable, as were most of the tributaries that flow into the main system. After breakfast I was able to admire the multitude of waterfalls that had appeared all around the es-

tuary, battling to return the rain water to the sea.

Some of the party chose to go on a hike. The lazy members of the team (including me) chose to hang out in camp. I dozed off in the tent, enjoying the fact that the Harley garage had closed for the day. JD and Karl sat in the cook tent reading. After a couple of hours snooze, I wandered through camp and just outside the door was a whopping great bear print, fresh in the mud. I alerted the chaps to the fact they nearly had a very close encounter with a Grizzly and then we checked out its route to the camp. This bear had casually walked along the side of the valley and straight up the steps into camp. Russ later informed us that it was probably a certain young male who had visited before and he was going to have a word!

Saturday soon came around and we started to break camp. All the gear was stowed in our kits bags. This time we did not have to wear waders for the journey and it was time to say goodbye to Russ and the team who had done a marvelous job of looking after us. As a final reminder of how close we were to nature, a fully racked Moose ran straight through the camp not 5 yards from where we sat drinking our coffee. Now that's something that does not happen very often.

On the trip back from the camp to King Salmon, with the Alaskan scenery beneath and all around me, I had chance to reflect on the week; 250+ Dolly Varden, 30+ Salmon (hooked, not necessarily landed) bears, moose, Bald Eagles, more bears, the best rib eye ever, great friendships formed.....truly an Epic Adventure!

P.S. Of the 1,000 + trout and 100+ Salmon, all but 6 were returned safely to the water. The balance tasted fantastic.

'The phrase "to take the Mickey (out of someone)" is a British term meaning "to take the fight, the vigor, the gravity, the self-importance out of someone, by mocking them, usually in a very subtle way.